

## This Invisible Enemy and what lessons to learn

We revel in our glory. We should be taking a long hard look in the mirror but we are so taken with our own reflection. Our arrogance blinds us to our fragility and what we already know. A New Year and nature conspires against us. There is probably no mastermind who has evaluated our weakness but instead mother earth- the ultimate supercomputer throwing random circumstances into existence. A challenge is created out of nothing, a foe never met or vanquished and suddenly survival of the fittest becomes an evolutionary term that becomes relevant to us. Are we the first to suffer in this way? No, every 100 yrs or so we seem obligated to struggle with an enemy of this sort.

But we are strong and we are mighty, so we don't need to learn from history because back then we didn't know any better, we are so clever now, aren't we? We are the masters of all we survey, the dominant species on this planet; we invented the smart phone for God's sake. Besides it could never happen to us. It's in China, so far away, and we are ready for anything, right?

Meanwhile this particular invisible enemy doesn't have a soul, it doesn't know right from wrong, it just is. It's good at spreading, it has a 2 week incubation period, it can be spread even before you know you have the disease and it can kill at a terrible rate. We can't judge it by our standards and take the moral high ground. It's not good against evil. This invisible enemy is not distracted by money or power or wealth or beauty or love and affection for its descendents. It doesn't care that we have to get back to work, or want to meet a friend, kiss our mother and father, or live with a vulnerable loved one. We are so much more connected than ever before. The world population is so much greater. Globalisation has meant that our economies are increasingly interlinked. There is no such thing as complacency in the viral world or covering up a problem or shifting the blame or taking the credit- these are human concerns. Moral conundrums between people dying or getting back to work, preparing a health service for a Pandemic or spending the money elsewhere are not issues for a virus. These are human manifestations. All this and our knowledge and understanding of this invisible enemy is incomplete!

So perhaps this invisible enemy is not to be underestimated, perhaps it even has the upper hand. The truth it's taking advantage of all our attributes. It's using our weakness against us and turning what we thought were our strengths into weakness both physically and as a society. By March the invisible enemy is out of control in Italy and Spain. It has gripped us by the throat and is squeezing the air out of our lungs and now it's going to take a monumental effort to overcome this monster and breathe again.

We in most part are making that effort. We have had successes and failures along the way. Our politicians and medical leaders are making extremely difficult decisions which are critical and time sensitive. They are problem solving under circumstances where the speed at which they solve the problem will be directly related to lives being lost. Even the best intentioned making the best decisions will lose lives in their country. It may be that one country is dealing well but what difference does that make when the more populated country next door is not. It is so easy with the benefit of hindsight to criticise and the difficulty of the circumstances should certainly be considered but it seems that we are not learning fast enough and for now at least making the same old very

human errors and that is why the progress we are making is so very slow. We put out one fire only for a spark to start another more dangerous blaze to start next door.

It is widely accepted that China lost control of this invisible enemy in the initial outbreak. They may have opened Pandora's Box but did well to contain and suppress and are widely applauded for that. They did this with draconian measures but they are measures that objectively worked. In the western world we didn't learn from the initial Chinese mistake and as a result of arrogance and complacency and a lack of preparedness made the very same errors. When we realised too late we compounded that mistake because we were and are not prepared to impinge our civil liberties and in so doing quash this virus in the same way as the Chinese did. We quite rightly regard liberty as strength but the invisible enemy only thrives under these circumstances. Here in the UK on the very day when the WHO was saying Test, Test, Test and combine this testing with contact tracing we took the decision to stop testing in the community. There may have been practical and economic reasons for doing this but the invisible enemy didn't care about these considerations and for a time it spread unchecked in the community. The same now is being replicated in the USA, Russia, Japan and the rest of the European continent. There are successes and templates to follow- Germany, South Korea. These examples show that action taken early enough and with the right strategy can lead to success in democracies without the necessity for hugely draconian lockdowns.

The USA's current response is particularly troubling with several (up till now) relatively unaffected states now able to come out of lockdown. This strategy seems to fly in the face of any understanding about this invisible enemy particularly where appropriate testing and contact tracing is not yet in place. It seems to have come about as a result of political and financial pressure as well as the tone set by the President.

I worry too about the consequences in underdeveloped countries. This invisible enemy has shown already that it has its worst effect in old and vulnerable populations and populations of colour. It seems to me that this pandemic is just beginning and the decisions we make in the developed world are and will have a devastating effect in those communities that don't have the resources to deal with the problem. The death tolls could be catastrophic.

We will overcome this invisible menace at huge cost. Certainly our lives will not be the same for some time. This is a global problem which can only be dealt with via a fully coordinated global response with each and every country forced to take action at the behest of the body in charge of this response. This is very different from the system which exists at the moment where each and every country has taken the action that they feel is necessary. Such an organisation should be fully funded and fully accountable and responsible.

To me it felt like from the start this was a problem that we could deal with. Despite all that I have said there are also things in our favour. We can take some comfort that the death rate and transmissibility of this invisible enemy is not as high as some other virus'. From a technological perspective we seem able to deal with this. Our resources have and will be stretched but we will prevail whether that is through suppressing or eliminating the problem via social distancing etc or eventual vaccination. Our celebrations will be muted at the end of all this and we must see this as a warning shot across our bows. This feels like a test run for something far worse. Perhaps this is an illogical irrational assumption but it doesn't feel that way. I'm not religious but perhaps someone up there is trying to send us a message! The effects of climate change on our globe are indisputable and

if this crisis has taught us anything it is that a global response is required. There are so many parallels between the current crisis and what we are facing regarding the threat due to global warming, not least that it is the poorest, oldest and most vulnerable that will suffer the most. Throughout this crisis there were several one way doors that we passed through where there was no going back, a point of no return where it was too late to deal with the situation easily and without great cost. We are facing some of those same doors with climate change. I would consider the current crisis about as loud a wakeup call as the world could get. We cannot continue to exhibit the same complacency and arrogance in the face of nature. The solution will be similar- an asserted and coordinated global response to deal with a global problem. When the dust settles there will be a million reasons not to take action but in my view we must now take the most drastic action to preserve our planet for future generations and we can only do this together and in a very different way to the current approach.

And as I sit here in lockdown in a beautifully still and quiet London I realise that all I can hear are the birds chirping and the whirring ambulance sirens which seem to fill the air every 5 minutes. In a few weeks time, in all probability, there will be far less time to think and we will be back to our everyday problems but for now, as someone with far too much time on his hands, that's my take on the world.

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